

## Dale Farm Travellers eviction: the battle of Basildon

Local councils say they can no longer afford to provide sites for Travellers – evictions are about to begin

By [Patrick Barkham](#)



Travellers site in Essex. Photograph: Suzanne Plunkett/REUTERS

25/03/2011 - As the rain fills the potholes in the rough track outside, Mary McCarthy sits beneath a towering vase of burgundy and cream artificial roses and gestures to her immaculate living room. "This might look like a house to you but it's a chalet that's been broken down into two pieces and moved."

Broken down and moved is the fate that awaits McCarthy and 86 Traveller families who have made a secluded field in the Essex countryside their home for the past decade. Basildon council voted to devote up to £8m, one third of its annual budget, to the eviction of the [families of Dale Farm](#) and destroy the community they have created in an area of green belt land.

The battle over Dale Farm, one of the largest unauthorised Traveller sites in the UK, shows how Gypsies and Travellers are being pummelled by a perfect storm. The Channel 4 documentary [My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding](#) confirmed popular prejudices that Travellers are wealthy, vulgar freeloaders and spawned a rash of "My big fat Gypsy..." headlines. As the welfare sector cuts are hitting Traveller education services while squeezed budgets mean local authorities are even less willing to provide sites for Gypsies. Temporary planning permissions issued to many Travellers five years ago by councils desperate to make controversial sites disappear, are expiring. This year, temporary permissions for 50 Gypsy sites in South Cambridgeshire alone – leaving Travellers mired in an expensive and insecure planning tangle. And now, most alarmingly of all for Travellers, council opposition has given them to a clamour of supportive comments from [David Cameron](#) and [Eric Pickles](#), Conservative [local government](#) secretary – who is fast turning his personal vehement opposition to unauthorised Traveller sites into government policy.

When McCarthy and her relatives pulled up at Dale Farm 10 years ago it appeared to be a solution to the problem of life on the road. McCarthy, a great-grandmother, had a scrap yard from her travelling days because it was a rare place where they could get water. Adjacent to the busy dual carriageway around Basildon, with pylons and two catteries for neighbours, the scrap yard was far from idyllic. That suited McCarthy with a large Gypsy site next door where residents had obtained planning permission in the 1970s, they believed they would be left alone. They were wrong. After 10 years of planning applications and the opposition of neighbours and Conservative-run Basildon council, the 400 residents of Dale Farm are now a 28-day eviction notice away from being thrown off their land.

Unlike many neat Travellers' sites, Dale Farm is currently a sorry sight. Some derelict and strewn with rubbish, corrugated iron fences are collapsing and the ground is littered with bottles and toys. The eviction threat is "absolutely dreadful" say McCarthy. She says they would clear up the mess if they were not losing their homes. "It's a bit frightening, [thinking the bulldozers are going to come in after 10 years of squatting](#). We bought and paid for the land. It was a scrap yard. It wasn't like a beauty spot and Travellers ruined it." McCarthy insists that eviction will make

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The laws and attitudes of modern society make no space for nomadic life. Most are forced to accept an uneasy compromise: a plot, or pitch, of their own, so they can get their children to school, but caravans and chalets rather than bricks and mortar, so they can have extended families and travel in the holidays. For all the tabloid furore over unauthorised Gypsy sites, there are 14,510 caravans on council and private sites with planning permission in England and just 3,636 caravans without; these unauthorised sites could be accommodated on as little as one square mile of land.

This modest need has not been met in the past decade, however, because councils have been reluctant to identify suitable plots of land for Gypsies. The eviction of Dale Farm is an exception. Basildon council has successfully removed travellers from another site. Traveller families were last week told by South Cambridgeshire district council they had been evicted from Smithy Fen, Cottenham. "We're not wanted anywhere. We're not wanted in the countryside. We're not wanted in the town," says Candy Sheridan, a Liberal Democrat councillor and Traveller who helps others through the labyrinthine planning process. And again, she finds applications for sites rejected on grounds of "visual impact". "visual impact" means is that councillors don't want to see us. We are part of the landscape and we have been for 600 years. We have more right to be there than they do.

Under Labour, councils were obliged to provide a certain number of sites for Gypsies alongside regular [housing](#) in their development plans. Basildon was supposed to provide 100 pitches in addition to the 100 authorised (mostly privately owned) pitches it had. But the coalition has signalled it will scrap these regional targets, so councils are no longer obliged to do so. Basildon council says instead it will provide three new pitches each year to meet demand. South Cambridgeshire district council has no plan to provide or approve any new sites at all, despite having more caravans than any other local authority in the region. Sheridan, who is full of good sense and pragmatic solutions, is actually sympathetic to local councillors; the objections, ultimately, lie with the settled community – all support if they back Travellers. A Gypsy site "is on a par with an asylum, a prison or a wind turbine", in terms of popularity with the propertied classes, Sheridan.

Joseph G Jones of [the Gypsy Council](#) puts it more bluntly: "It's racially motivated. There's nobody for a moment speaking honestly who wouldn't admit that? No one wants a Gypsy site next to their house. They fear their house price might go down and there's an irrational fear of Gypsies and Travellers and a fear of crime, which they think is justified from a site in the area. It's very simple."

Tony Ball, the leader of [Basildon council](#), has spent much of his career tackling the Dale Farm conflict. How is an £8m eviction (Basildon's emergency fund will cover the £8m a week stand-off with bailiffs; the Essex policing bill is estimated at an additional £8m use of taxpayers' money)? "Look at the alternatives. If a council turns a blind eye to breaking what moral right do we have to enforce against anybody else who breaks the law?" He insists the dispute is simply about unauthorised construction on green belt. A bedroom house is being demolished nearby. "Green belt is there for a reason to prevent urban sprawl."

Ball points out that Dale Farm residents own four unoccupied but legal pitches in Smithy Fen, Cambridgeshire, "but they say they prefer to remain where they are. People don't prefer to live in Mayfair if I could afford it," he says. Four pitches would only accommodate 10% of the Dale Farm residents and such comments make the council's opposition seem like a vendetta. Is it? "Not at all. You or I wouldn't be able to build on green belt without permission," he says. "We are communicating with the Gypsy Council, these negotiations go on up until the day – if it has to happen – of us carrying out the forced eviction. I have a dialogue and I very much hope not to spend the money, but after 10 years the day when you have to say enough is enough and the law has to be upheld."





Traveller Mary McCarthy has lived at Dale Farm for 10 years. Photograph: Siobhán Greene for the Guardian

Most constituents seem to support Ball's view. People wonder why Gypsies "rules" – and why they can't just live in a house. David Cameron knew he was talking to a large number of the static community when he talked of Dale Farm and "the unfairness that one law applies to everybody else and, on too many occasions, a different law applies to Travellers". Basildon council is obliged by law to provide for the housing needs of the community. It has offered Dale Farm residents flats and houses. "There is no need for the elderly or the young to live by the roadside because we have offered them a roof over their heads where they can continue their education and healthcare," says Ball.

Around half the Gypsy community now lives in houses, but for many, like Mary McCarthy, living behind bricks and mortar would be torture. A house can be both claustrophobic when you have grown up in a caravan. Dale Farm may look tatty but there is a strong community here. Women pop into each other's caravans, chatting and borrowing things. Men arrive home from work together in their vans; teenagers mooch messages to their aunts.

"I have a lot of friends in the settled community. They say: 'It's lovely the way you can come in and out and talk to one another, I don't even know my neighbours.' And you live next to one another because we get a lot of stick," says McCarthy. One of her friends prefers to remain anonymous, chips in: "You know the children are safe if they stay in the community. The community protects the old as well. 'Old people dependent on their young' would suddenly be isolated in a distant council flat," explains Grattan Puxon, who lives near Dale Farm. "They wouldn't survive it."

Sheridan is convinced there are practical solutions for hard-pressed councils that want to live on council-run sites; they want to run their own and, if supported by central government loans, can do so through [Community Land Trusts](#); the first has been established by the (Conservative) [Mendip district council](#) in Somerset. Even more alluring is central government money to help councils fund sites. Sheridan's local council has dipped into this fund to create two "transit camps" where Travellers are not housed for more than three months – without spending any local taxpayers' money. As it stands, according to Sheridan, many councils do not even know about this £60m. Or that Ball says Basildon has not used this fund to find alternatives to Dale Farm because it does not have that land available to accommodate that amount of people within the council's boundaries.

Sheridan still believes Basildon can save money, save council jobs and stop the evictions – and she is helping Dale Farm residents make three new applications in Basildon to provide alternative pitches. Ball cannot comment on the possibilities of specific applications, but he is clear about one thing: Basildon cannot provide for all of Dale Farm. In an ideal world, would the Dale Farm Travellers move away from Basildon? "Absolutely," he says.

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While a few Lib Dems, notably [Lord Avebury](#), are lobbying vigorously for G coalition, Travellers have noticed a chill wind of change in government. "With making the comments he made last week about Dale Farm, it is open season Jones. "The coalition has just turned its back on the community." As MP for door to Basildon – Eric Pickles has taken a strong personal stance against un Traveller sites. Now his much-vaunted [localism bill](#) will free councils from t to provide a certain number of sites and outlaw retrospective planning perm: been virtually the only way Travellers have managed to get sites approved. "I of heart for us. They were willing to try and help us but this government . . ." off. "If they could get a toxic spray to do away with us they would."

Ball says his appeals to Westminster for help have been ignored by both Labo coalition. "The government may change but civil servants don't," he says. "I with the failure to recognise that this is a national issue and not just a Basild

According to Thomas Acton, professor of Romani studies at the [University](#) Labour was far from perfect and only really began addressing housing and ex Travellers after 2003. "You provide sites, you get on with the slow, stubborn community relations and then the problem goes away," says Acton. "Once yo sites working well, nobody notices them." He believes the eviction at Dale Fa resisted. "If the Basildon eviction goes smoothly and Eric Pickles is embolden Travellers out of their homes we could see things getting much worse," says why the battle of Basildon has to be fought to the last moment and the evictio as expensive as possible. If Basildon rolls over, the Tories will come back to t where Travellers have been living legally for years."

Protesters – "anarchists," says Ball – are likely to join residents in resisting e Farm. "It's obvious that people are going to go out and fight for their homes. going to say 'hello, how are you?' and let their homes be taken away," says M vows that protests will be non-violent. Other Dale Farm Travellers, with the l desperate, are less placatory. "We've been putting our arguments in court an and it hasn't done us any good," says one. "Come back when the bailiffs are b good story then. You'll see them leaving on fire."

Link: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/mar/25/dale-farm-t-eviction-basildon>

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